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# TOPONYMIC EDUCATION AND PRACTICE AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION: TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

## Technical assistance to develop national geographical names programmes

Paper submitted by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names**

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## Background

The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names was established in pursuance of the Economic and Social Council resolutions to further the standardization of geographical names at both national and international levels. UNGEGN aims to promote the provision of advice, and the "supply of scientific and technical help to developing countries in national standardization of their geographical names."[1] Beyond this, UNGEGN provides assistance to all countries desiring to create national names authorities, as by promoting national standardization, UNGEGN also increases the levels of international standardization.

## Rationale

Names standardization at the national level implies the determination and regularization of the most appropriate written form of geographical names and their practical applications, by an authority or a process endorsed by the Government of the country. International standardization may then be concerned with practices which include promoting the use of these nationally-standardized names in a consistent way, and in agreeing on principles governing the use of names of features extending beyond a single sovereignty.

Standardization of the written forms of geographical names is not a mere academic exercise, rather it is a process with very tangible practical benefits. Standard written forms and applications of geographical names are important to government administrators, to industry and commerce, to education and science - they provide a clear, unambiguous geographical reference framework to which other information can effectively be linked. In

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1 Statute of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, 1986.

particular, the existence and use of standardized geographical names is invaluable to map and chart producers; to land and water surveyors; to postal, shipping and transportation services; to land, sea and air rescue agencies; to educational and scientific programmes; and to agencies today using geographical names as a basic element of developing information systems.

In addition to the many technical benefits of a geographical names standardization programme, there are direct benefits in a cultural sense, in recording and preserving an important aspect of a country's heritage.

Justification of a national geographical names programme may be difficult in a government environment where other social and economic concerns seem of greater significance. However, on examination it is often found that much money and time are already being expended on names issues, but are being absorbed by different programme areas. Work of cartographic, transport, census, and legal departments, for example, may be overlapping in effort, each collecting and selecting geographical names with no coordination, and likely with conflicting results. A national programme to consolidate this work and to make results consistent and available to a larger public provides greater benefits at less overall cost.

## Process

In his manual[2] on national standardization, Orth has addressed the establishment of a national geographical names programme. He identified three basic sequential steps in setting up such a programme:

a) initial concern and effort to start a programme;

b) planning goals and basic principles and procedures; and

c) obtaining legal authority.

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2 Orth, Donald J. (1990): "Organization and functions of a national geographical names standardization programme: a manual." *World Cartography*, Vol. XXI, United Nations, New York, p. 11-40. [Sales No. E.90.I.12].

The methods used for achieving national standardization vary from one country to another, and must be suited to individual needs. The process established may include a decision-making body in the form of a geographical names board; or the authority may be vested in a geographical names office in an existing government department or university; or, if appropriate, more than one government department may have administrative responsibility for different categories of geographical names.

**Technical advice**

Before major undertakings on names standardization programmes are initiated or developed from existing procedures, a two or three week visit by a technical advisor (or advisors) could be extremely beneficial. Such an individual (or individuals) should have considerable, solid experience with his/her (their) own national names authorities before undertaking such an assignment.

The roles and functions of technical advisors should include various elements of fact-finding, evaluation and recommendation. As far as possible, the country interested in receiving technical advice should provide appropriate background information to facilitate preparations ahead of the scheduled visit.

The following elements are set forth as relevant to the development of a national geographical names standardization programme. It is, however, recognized that not every issue may be addressed in any particular situation.

1) Determining the initial interest and concern for a national geographical names standardization programme

   - key driving force ... management level and "power"
   - existing government structure and decision-making reality
   - other key areas, programmes and individuals to support and participate in the names programme

2) Determining the status quo

   - various authorities, departments, etc. currently involved in geographical names
   - costs and efforts currently expended

- legal authority (if any)
- what are the current primary needs that existing areas endeavour to satisfy
- what records (names and associated materials) exist, including scale(s) of map/chart coverage of various areas of the country
- degree of possible financial/personnel and materiel support availability
- what "local" educational authorities (universities) have materials, interest, expertise, etc.
- administrative, economic, social, and cultural environment in which a names programme would operate

3) Discussing with local management personnel

- type of names authority which would best fit the existing government structure and operation
- status and resources (people, funds, time, facilities) available for staff support activities for focal office
- current and potential users and their needs
- type of geographical names coverage needed (types of names, density, areal coverage, etc.)
- attribute information required in initial and future phases of a standardization programme
- easily available and other existing sources of geographical names information
- local preferences for structure of programme, maintenance of records
- distribution of information and publicity of programmes
- availability of staff and training possibilities (internal and external)
- rationale for programme
- types of legal authority possible
- main issues or problems that are likely to be encountered in the establishment of a national geographical names standardization programme
- language issues of names in relations to official, national and locally-used languages; multilingual usage
- language issues of programme maintenance
- issues concerning transboundary feature names

4) Preparing reporting document to provide recommendations for a framework of programme development based on:

- towards a national standardization programme

  - rationale for development
  - benefits to be attained

- appropriate structure for a national authority

  - type of organization to be established
  - actions required to achieve this
  - implementation plan and schedule

- main objectives of the programme

  - goals to be attained
  - relevance to various other government programmes

- inputs required

  - essential government support required
  - staff support, facilities and materials needed
  - legal authority and government recognition required
  - type of responsibility that must be accorded such a programme
  - budget requirements for initial set-up and for maintenance (office facilities, staff, equipment, supplies, reference documents, training, ongoing acquisitions, etc.)

- activities to be undertaken

  - standardization ideals
  - development of policies, principles and procedures (what types of names to be standardized, what attributes to record, source of names information)
  - establishment of a board and/or a focal office, plus advisory committees and links to universities
  - development of legislation

- organization of staff
- training of staff
- standardization process
- office treatment of names (methods, examples, equipment, etc.)
- recommendations re field collection of geographical names (if/when appropriate)

• outputs anticipated

- establishment of geographical name records - analogue and/or digital
- information for other government authorities re names usage
- provision of standardized names to authorities (e.g. mapping authorities)
- dissemination of information packages on programmes, to media, educational authorities, etc.

• further advice required and appropriate follow-up activities

Within this framework, emphasis will obviously vary, and must be adjusted to individual needs.

5) Arranging for a selection of suitable reference documents to be made available through the UN or from individual countries.

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